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# To narrate everything that is under Heaven: the idea of tiān 天 (Heaven) in the formation of pre-Modern Chinese historiography

Narrar tudo aquilo que está abaixo do Céu: a ideia de tiān 天  
(Céu) na estruturação da historiografia chinesa pré-Moderna

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### Abstract

This article aims to discuss the defining role of the concept of “Heaven”, or *tiān* 天, in structuring an epistemology of Chinese historiography, especially during the period understood here as pre-Modern – that is, prior to the political, social and cultural changes that marked the Late Qīng 清 and the early Republican period. This analysis is based on the methodological assessments of Nicola di Cosmo, Chenshan Tian and Huaiqi Wu, who point to the intimate relationship between political theories created in the Zhōu 周 period and the writing of History, so that one can argue for the relatively pragmatic character of the record and interpretation of the past. This perspective will be understood in a variety of historiographical products, such as the *Shǐjì* 史記 of Sīmǎ Qiān 司馬遷 and the *Shǐtōng* 史通 of Liú Zhǐjǐ 劉知幾. It is concluded that the idea of *tiān* acts as the main element of cohesion between past and present, thus guaranteeing the political and intellectual function of historiography.

### Keywords

Ancient China. Historiography. Concept of History.



## **“A good historian carefully distinguishes the boundary between the Celestial and the human”: traditional Chinese historiography in perspective.**

At the turn of the 18th to the 19th century, while the Chinese empire of Qīng 清 found itself increasingly entangled in the international plots of growing European imperialism, the intellectual Zhāng Xuéchéng 章學誠 (1738-1801) sought to define a philosophy of history that would make sense of an increasingly accelerated and uncertain present. Zhāng, after all, was part of an informal and heterogeneous group of thinkers who gradually noticed a certain intellectual insufficiency in traditional Chinese historiography. For this group, the models of historical recording were plastered and inflexible, and should therefore be rethought (WU, 2018, p. 415). Faced with this restlessness, Zhāng wrote *Wénshǐ Tōngyì* 文史通義, “General Meaning of Literature and History”, a work published posthumously in 1832 that sought to argue, in general terms, that *transformation* (*biàn* 變) was the keynote of time and history. Against the stagnation of this official and traditional historiography, Zhāng pronounced his celebrated aphorism: “the Six Classics are History”, *liù jīng jiē shǐ* 六經皆史 (Zhang, 2010, p. 6). In other words, Zhāng argued that even the paradigmatic “Six Classics” of the Confucian tradition (*liù jīng* 六經) could be read as artifacts of their own time - and not necessarily as the materialization of a timeless wisdom.

What Zhāng and his Late Qīng compatriots mean by “stagnation” is a characteristic that permeated historiography for at least 1380 years, sometimes more and sometimes less intensely: its political institutionality. Since the 7th century, imperial governments had maintained historiographical secretariats, that is, bureaucratic apparatuses focused on the official recording of dynastic histories known as *Shǐguǎn* 史館, or “History Institutes”. The first *shǐguǎn* was established in the 620s by Tàizōng of Táng 太宗唐, who reigned between 626 and 649, and although the material produced in these specialized centres had the function of “recording the words of the sovereign and his actions so that the causes of success and failure can be investigated and verified, and the essence of all change can be penetrated” (Hartman & Deblasi, 2012, p. 19), their commitment to imperial officialdom prevented greater analytical possibilities. It is curious, therefore, that despite the methodological revisionism proposed by figures such as Zhāng Xuéchéng, Chinese historiography, from Táng to Qīng, seemed to be centred on the same epistemological core: “penetrating the essence of all change”, *jiū jǐn biàntōng* 究盡變通 (Xu, 1975, p. 2597).

What explains the convergence and divergence of Chinese historiographical models over time? What is the relationship between the analytical enterprise of the past and the political condition of the present? Why does the affinity between the imperial institution and the writing of history tend to generate tensions such as that noted by Zhāng Xuéchéng? In short, any answer to



these questions depends on understanding even more basic elements: the intellectual function of historiography and its underlying concepts. That said, in the following lines, this text will explore the aforementioned scopes - function and concepts - in an attempt to understand how some specific parameters ensured the logic and longevity of the Chinese historiographical enterprise during the imperial period.

### **“Heaven and Earth change, and the wise imitate these changes”: defining traditional Chinese historiography.**

Since pre-imperial times (i.e. before the political centralization of the Qín 秦 dynasty in 221 BC), History has played a leading role in structuring China’s culture - it is, to all intents and purposes, a “mainstay of civilization” (Bueno, 2013, p. 25). In earlier times - such as during the Shāng 商 (2nd millennium BC) - historiographical practice, if we can call it that, consisted of keeping factual records. The *jiǎgǔ* 甲骨 (“bone oracles”), for example, are the earliest significant evidence of the use of characters that would evolve into the *hànzì* 汉字 and their inscriptions already show an incipient written preservation of events, names of rulers and concern for the future (given the divinatory nature of these documents)<sup>1</sup>. In Shāng oracular writing, the term that designates “record” or “event” is very similar - in fact, it is a precursor - to *hànzì* 史, which denotes *shǐ*, “History” (Chow, 2008, p. 237-238). In other words, if our Latin term “History” derives from the Ancient Greek *historiā* ἱστορία, meaning “investigation”, the character *shǐ* 史 has its etymological origin in the idea of “record”.

The habit of recording events in writing on physical media reached great maturity centuries after the first *jiǎgǔ*, as early as the Zhōu 周 period (c. 1046 BC - 256 BC). The most celebrated examples of this practice are undoubtedly the *Shūjīng* 書經, “Book of Documents”, and the *Chūnqiū* 春秋, “Spring and Autumn”, both traditionally attributed to the thinker Kǒngzǐ 孔子, Confucius (or, in the case of the *Shūjīng*, it is the gathering of materials that is attributed to Confucius). The former, an important Confucian classic, is a compilation of commands, treaties, orders or declarations of governments from the distant past, while the latter is a chronological analogue covering the period from 722 BC to 481 BC. The supposed authorship of Confucius, as well as the apparent antiquity of these works, makes them practically “instant classics”, texts that would generate the paradigm of how future generations would need to record the political past - and, consequently, also how they should act. Thus, from the *Shūjīng* and the *Chūnqiū*, the foundation

<sup>1</sup> The spelling used in bone oracles is called *Jiǎgǔwén* 甲骨文, “inscription in hoof and bone”. It is based on archaic pictograms which, over time, took on the logogrammatic contours of Chinese writing as we know it.



stone is laid for a type of relationship with the past that is essential for understanding later Chinese historiography: the record of past acts and actions serves as a moral compass for future acts and actions, as in a kind of “Mirror of Princes” (Pines, 2020, p. 2).

This pedagogical character that emerges from the first Chinese records of actions and events becomes even more evident when we look at the exegetical narratives that emerge from the *Chūnqiū* in particular, such as the *Gōngyáng zhuán* 谷梁传 (“Gōngyáng Commentary”), *Gǔliáng zhuán* 谷梁传 (“Gǔliáng Commentary”) and the *Zuǒ zhuán* 左传 (“Zuǒ Commentary”). These three commentaries sought to unveil the intellectual (or moral) meaning hidden between the lines of the *Chūnqiū*, the Spring and Autumn Annals. The first two take on a much more politicized reading, concerned with the moral and ritualistic values of the text, while the *Zuǒ zhuán* adopts a more “historicist” stance, so to speak: it strives to read the *Chūnqiū* as a document of its time, therefore fallible, subject to more contextualized and flexible interpretations (PINES, 2020, p. 20-21). Considering that the first written form of these commentaries must date from a period almost contemporaneous with the Spring and Autumn Annals, we can see that the need for an *interpretative reading* of the underlying meaning of the historical record was already present even before a more consistent historiographical maturation.

This historiographical maturation came centuries after the writing (or compilation) of the *Chūnqiū* and went hand in hand with a political maturation. In the 3rd century BC, the foundation of an imperial structure with Qín and its subsequent solidification with Hàn 漢 added an extra dimension to the record of the past: the road to political unification. To make this statement more comprehensible, we can look at the *Lǚshì Chūnqiū* 吕氏春秋, “Spring and Autumn of Lord Lü”. This text, written by the important politician called Lü Bùwéi 吕不韦 around 239 BC - a few years before the Qín imperial foundation - was a chronicle (which is why it refers to the Spring and Autumn Annals in its title) impregnated with the idea of the emergence of a single, hegemonic state, which was in itself an ideological novelty (Lewis, 2011, p. 454). By anticipating the formation of an effective Chinese empire - Lü Bùwéi was the preceptor of Yíng Zhèng 嬴政, who would later ascend the throne under the name Qín Shǐ Huáng 秦始皇, the “First Emperor” - the historical narrative of the *Lǚshì Chūnqiū* was concerned with modelling a “single chronology”, a passage of time that took the ideal state (the Empire) as its standard. If before, in the Zhōu period, historical records were like diffuse torrents of water, from which sages would drink moral lessons, with Qín we have the ordering of these torrents into a river, whose source and mouth are the Chinese imperial institution itself. It was the beginning of a “state-sponsored” historiography (Lewis, 2011, p. 440).



The next step in this project of imperial historical writing would come during the Hàn period, through the efforts of the Sīmǎ 司馬 family. The Sīmǎ family had a long tradition of political and bureaucratic service under pre-imperial rulers, especially in occupying the position of *tàishǐ* 太史, "Grand Historian" (Nienhauser Jr., 2011, p. 463)<sup>2</sup>. In this role of guardians and compilers of records, the most recognized members of the clan are undoubtedly Tán 談 (c. 165 BC - 110 BC) and his son Qiān 遷 (c. 145 BC - c. 86 BC). Sīmǎ Tán 司馬談 envisioned the writing of a "total history" of China, a narrative that would start from the temporal beginnings and guide the reader to the present-day Hàn - a proposal that certainly resonates with Lǚ Bùwéi's model of "time as a single river". The ambitious scale of the project, however, proved too great for Sīmǎ Tán's lifetime, and it fell to his son Sīmǎ Qiān 司馬遷 to continue and complete it. Thus was born the *Tàishǐgōng Shū* 太史公書, "Book of the Grand Historian of the Court", better known as "Records of the Great Historian", or just *Shǐjì* 史記, "Historical Records".

It is no exaggeration to say that the *Shǐjì* is perhaps the most important historical work of Imperial China - not so much because of its wealth of information, but because of its structuring role in what would become Chinese historiography by definition (Di Cosmo, 2014, pp. 260-261). The task that Sīmǎ Qiān entrusted to himself was the writing of a total and universal history that went back to the mythical times of Huángdì 黃帝, the Yellow Emperor, so his collection of information had to go beyond archival consultation, but also extend to working with anecdotes and oral traditions (Li-Wen, 1987, p. 22). All the information gathered by Sīmǎ Qiān therefore needed a literary structure that would allow the creation of a temporal linearity and a unified and homogeneous logic. To this end, he devised a textual organization based on stylistic malleability, creating a text marked by annals, chronological tables, treatises and biographies (Hardy, 1999, p. 14). In other words, without directly breaking with traditional aspects of historical recording, Sīmǎ Qiān developed a *form of investigation* and a *model of organization* for historiographical narrative.

From the *Shǐjì* onwards, an effective standard for the writing of dynastic histories began. So much so that this work later became the first in a list of 24 official historical works (*Èrshísì shǐ* 二十四史), collectively referred to as *Zhèngshǐ* 正史, "Orthodox Histories" (Hardy, 1999, pp. 14-15). A few years after Sīmǎ Qiān, at the turn of the 1st century AD to the 2nd century AD, Bān Gù 班固 and his sister Bān Zhāo 班昭 organized the second *Zhèngshǐ*, known as the *Hànshū*, or "Book of Hàn", a dynastic narrative that follows the mould of the *Shǐjì*, but maintains a more specific chronological focus, going from 206 BC to 23 AD.

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<sup>2</sup> The position of *tàishǐ* 太史 is made up of the ideogram 史 (*shǐ*) which, as we saw earlier, is polysemic. In this specific case, it can be translated as "historian", "scribe" or "astrologer". Later on, we'll see how these names have internal cohesion.





From then on, although not unanimously and homogeneously, this category of “Orthodox History” would remain firm - a phenomenon that is not exactly surprising. Even before the methodological innovations of the imperial period, the maintenance of historical records (such as annals) depended on a body of literate officials (or aristocrats) organized around a ruler - after all, chronology and events considered relevant were related to the different political spaces that made up pre-Imperial China. After the advent of the *Lǚshì Chūnqiū* and the Qín Empire, the strengthening of a centralized court (whether in practice or just in ideological ambition) was fertile ground for the better organization of positions such as the *tàishǐ*, the “Grand Historian” and, later, even for the creation of historiographical workshops (the *shǐguǎn*). In other words, the conditions to produce historiographical works along the lines of the *Shǐjì* and the *Hànshū* were closely linked to government structures.

Between imperial patronage and permanent notions of the past as a moral compass for the present, it is difficult to think of a Chinese historiographical matrix that was not, to some extent, focused on political life. Therefore, when Zhāng Xuéchéng writes about his philosophy of history almost two millennia after Sīmǎ Qiān - and his contemporaries criticize the plastering of the traditional historical narrative - what was at stake was perhaps *less* the model of historiography and *more* its interpretative meaning, that is, the function of its writing. After all, as Zhāng Xuéchéng himself states:

Now what an historian records are events, and events must be written down if they are to be passed on [to future generations]. And so, every good historian must work on writing well. Most, though, do not realize that writing can suffer from being the servant of events (...). When feelings are rooted in one’s nature, this is the Heavenly. When feelings carry one’s nature away and engage in selfindulgence, this is the human. The meaning of history comes from Heaven, and yet historical writing must rely on human effort in order to come into being (Zhang, 2010, p. 78).

Zhāng Xuéchéng is therefore advocating for historical writing that is consonant with moral principles that are incompatible with the pettiness of personal politics - or the servant of earthly interests. Although this passage dates from the 19th century, it could possibly have been understood (and found agreement) by older historians. This is the case of Liú Zhǐjī 刘知几, a historian who wrote the *Shǐtōng* 史通 (“Generality of History”) at the beginning of the 8th century AD. Concerned with the theoretical and methodological specificities of historiography, Liú Zhǐjī states that:



In ancient times, when two armies confronted each other or when two states vied for dominance, each side would write its own account, with no attempt to conceal anything. Why was this so? The death of a ruler in a state is like an eclipse of the sun or the moon. No amount of ornate phraseology and fabrication could conceal it. But such is no longer the case in the more recent past. (Liu, 2023, p. 146).

Between the lines of his complaint, Liú Zhǐjī seems to criticize more recent historiography, understanding that its verbiage was designed to conceal rather than elucidate. Whether this narrative falsehood was attributed to the political desires of a ruler or the vanity of the historian makes little difference. What interests us is the critical stance - which would not be entirely out of place if it were transposed to Zhāng Xuéchéng's Qīng period.

Among the transtemporal leaps of this elucidation of the nature of traditional Chinese historiography, we can draw some general conclusions: firstly, it can be seen that the keeping of Chinese historical records was a concern as old as writing itself; secondly, the past was revered as a repository of good examples and wisdom, in such a way that this idealization helps shape the character of traditional historiography; thirdly, the meaning of history is not confined to the record itself, but to its proper interpretation, guided by an aura of morality and certain conceptions of virtue; fourthly, the model of recording and interpretation goes hand in hand with the political processes of imperial unification; fifthly, the Hàn period witnessed historians projecting a homogeneous historiographical framework, in line with a proposal of centrality, in such a way that the narrative of the past became even more aligned with the imperial court, giving rise to the *Zhèngshǐ*, the "Orthodox Dynastic Histories"; sixthly, this political patronage did not generate unanimity, and criticism of a similar nature could be seen throughout the imperial period, both in the 8th century and in the 19th century.

Even if we only scratch the epistemological surface of the traditional Chinese historiographical model through this general perspective, we can already see the longevity of narrative structures and conceptions of past and present in China's imperial period.

So, let's return to some of the arguments set out above before moving on. If both Liú Zhǐjī and Zhāng Xuéchéng criticized, at such different times, the partisan historical narrative, and if from the Táng to the Qīng period it was understood that History should be about the "change of all things", we can reinforce the previous statement: the problem of historiography does not lie so much in the *form* as it does in the *interpretative content*. In other words, the question to be asked of traditional Chinese historical works is not *why*, but *what for*.



Understanding the intricacies and implications of imperial Chinese historical interpretation requires us to delve into some of its guiding concepts

## **“Investigating the interaction between Heaven and Earth”: the nature of Change in traditional Chinese historiography.**

At a certain point in his *Shǐjì*, Sīmǎ Qiān lets out a confused indignation as he reflects on a famous statement by Lǎozǐ 老子: “the Way of Heaven is impartial, it is always with good men”, *Tiāndào wú qīn, cháng yǔ shàn rén* 天道無親, 常與善人 (Tzu, 2011, p. 154). Looking at the past, Sīmǎ Qiān sees so many bad people who have found fortune in life while several other good people have faced only misfortune and tragedy, and he finally asks himself: “Perhaps this is the meaning of the ‘Way of Heaven’. Is it so or not?” (Ch’ien, 1994, p. 4). What the historian expresses here is not scepticism about Lǎozǐ’s classic teachings, but rather a consideration of the difficulty intrinsic to the role of the sage charged with interpreting the past.

Now, historical research in Imperial China (and even before) is not a disinterested intellectual endeavour. Nor is it a philosophical abstraction, with no direct connection to the material and socio-political conditions of its time. As we saw earlier, the investigation of the past in the traditional Chinese context has a pedagogical function, of more or less direct application to people’s lives and actions - especially those of rulers. This means that the historian, *shǐ*, is also an interpreter. When he looks at the past, he doesn’t just *narrate* what happened, but *learns* the lesson behind what happened (Huang, 2007, p. 183). Once the lesson has been learned, the narration itself takes on a new dimension: it now teaches, and it is only through the intellectual and artistic skill of the historian that this teaching can be passed on - an interpreter, therefore. To a certain extent, even a teacher.

Is it, then, a *historia magistra vitae* along Roman lines? No. Chinese historiography does not seek to be a “teacher of life” who teaches through the successes and failures of the past. On the contrary, the historical vision reveals the cosmic mechanisms that govern existence, and this understanding would generate a more virtuous attitude. These cosmic mechanisms are what Sīmǎ Qiān, through Lǎozǐ, calls the *Tiāndào* 天道, “Way of Heaven”. To better highlight the difference between *Magistra Vitae* and *Tiāndào*, let’s go back to Sīmǎ Qiān’s reflection: in it, he mentions that the “bandit Zhí 跖” (a typical character in the philosophical literature of the Warring States period) killed innocent men every day, ate human flesh, was cruel and violent, spread chaos in the world with a band of a thousand villains, and yet, endowed with so much evil, died of old age (Ch’ien, 1994, p. 4). From the perspective of history as a *teacher of life*, what could



this fact teach us? Perhaps that crime pays, since Zhí committed so many evil deeds and yet died old and prosperous. From the perspective of *The Way to Heaven*, the message becomes a little less direct. We don't care whether Zhí was successful or not - the important thing is that we know that he was a man without virtue, which is why Sīmǎ Qiān rhetorically questions the difficulty of the historian's role in the face of cosmic designs: it's not an easy task to see beyond the historical fact (a bandit with a long and healthy life) and perceive, in the mind and heart, its true meaning (despite his success, the bandit and his vices must be rejected).

This "true meaning" of the Way of Heaven can be better understood if we take a closer look at the term itself. *Tiāndào* is a combination of two concepts of great depth and application: *Tiān* 天, "heaven" and *Dào* 道, "path", both understood in a literal, spiritual, ideological and abstract sense. Let's start with *Dào*, a term eternalized by Lǎozǐ in the work popularly known as *Dàodéjīng* 道德经, "Book of the Way and Virtue". The first sentence of the work states: "The path on which one walks is not the unchanging [eternal] path", *Dào kě dào, fēicháng dào* 道可道, 非常道 (Tzu, 2011, p. 2). Perhaps this is the most basic definition of *Dào*: that which is indefinable simply because it is the whole. Lǎozǐ continues: "Man follows the earth, the earth follows the sky, the sky follows the way [*Dào*], the way follows the natural", *Rén fǎ de, de fǎ tiān, tiān fǎ dào, dào fǎ zìrán* 人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然 (Tzu, 2011, p. 50). Here, understanding the meaning of *Dào* becomes more complicated, because it is implied that the concept would be subject to *zìrán* 自然, "natural" (or "nature"). The language of *Dàodéjīng* is excessively concise and arcane, but despite the possibilities of translation, we can actually infer that *Dào* is the manifestation of the laws of nature, that is, it is the indefinable order behind the functioning of the world.

For our purposes, we won't go into the philosophical implications or the polysemic transformations of *Dào* - the term, after all, occupies a central place in so-called Taoist, Confucian and even Buddhist doctrines (Tang, 2015, pp. 232-235). Understanding that the term designates, in most works, the idea of the *path* as the cosmic structure that governs the world is enough for us. It remains, then, to discuss the implications of *Tiān*, "Heaven".

*Tiān*, as we have seen, is a term with a literal interpretation, but also with political, ideological, spiritual and abstract dimensions - yet they are directly related. In its simplest form, the word means "heaven" in the practical sense, i.e. the firmament that covers the earth. However, since at least the early Zhōu period, *Tiān* takes on more complex traits, indicating both a higher spiritual force and the completeness of the universe in which *Dào* acts as the natural ruler. This more ethereal understanding also seems to have even more ancient roots. In the Shāng period, the evidence of bone oracles reveals a belief in the presence of powerful spirits who inhabited



the same plane as the living: ancestors, ancient rulers or ancestors who assumed leading roles in nature, such as the ten suns (*Shí rì* 十日) which, in later periods, were mythologized through the narrative of the archer *Hòu yì* 后羿 (Allan, 1981, pp. 293-294). The highest and most powerful of these spirits was *Shàngdì* 上帝, whose translation is usually “Supreme Lord” (literally “Ancestral Spirit above”) or, more lazily, “God” (although this is absolutely not a deity in the deistic model we know). *Shàngdì* was probably personified in the polar star, and like the other stars (spirits) and the ten suns (ancestors of the *Shāng*), he inhabited the sky, *Tiān*, in such a way that, in the passage to *Zhōu*, the sky becomes a kind of umbrella term for all the spiritual-celestial forces (Allan, 2007, p. 2). Therefore, in the *Zhōu* period, *Tiān* also becomes a designation for the highest and most important spirit of the cosmic order - or the cosmic order itself - just like *Shàngdì* before it.

However, this conceptual transformation of *Zhōu* adds further implications to the idea of *Tiān*. After all, the movement of celestial bodies (ancestors) marks the passage of time, the change of seasons and the right times for planting and harvesting. Moreover, from the sky come rain, lightning, winds and all the cosmic signs that can be seen (eclipses, planetary agglutinations, comets, meteor showers, etc.). The inexorable actions of the sky, beyond the control of any man or government, are also incorporated into the term *Tiān*. Thus, we begin to find bronze inscriptions (and, over time, longer texts) stating that celestial portents appeared during the rule of the king (*wáng* 王) *Wén* 周 of *Zhōu*, whose son, *Wǔ* 武, is said to have overthrown the last *Shāng* ruler, *Shāng Dì Xīn* 商帝辛.<sup>3</sup> These portents would indicate that *Tiān*, the body/space of unquestionable and inexorable actions, had graced the *Zhōu* with its favours, as in a mandate for them to rule - the Heavenly Mandate, *Tiānmìng* 天命 (Allan, 2007, pp. 38-39).

This intense relationship between a socio-political ideology and the literal and spiritual dimension of heaven (and all that it encompasses) would be strengthened from *Zhōu* onwards. Thus, in addition to the concepts of *Tiān* and *Tiānmìng* themselves, a variety of texts also use terms such as *Tiānzǐ* 天子, “Heavenly Son”, to refer to the ruler; *Tiānxià* 天下, “under Heaven”, which indicates both the earthly world and the imperial political space; and, as we have seen, *Tiāndào*, the heavenly *Dao*.

Obviously, all these ideological constructions are not explicitly defined in the sources and do not necessarily have absolute cohesion - a Confucian-influenced author would certainly have different perspectives from a reader of *Lǎozǐ*, from a follower of pure *Yīnyáng* 陰陽, from a

<sup>3</sup> The name *Shāng Dì* 商帝 should not be confused with *Shàngdì* 上帝. Although both contain the term *Dì* 帝 (“lord”, in the sense of “ancestral spirit”), *Shāng* 商 refers to a dynasty, while *Shàng* 上 means “above” or “superior”.



Buddhist and so on - but they point to a general structure: the *Dào*, "Way", designates the cosmic law, the *Tiān*, "Heaven", applies the law in the regimentation of the stars (we could perhaps use the term *macrocosm* here), and the men who inhabit the *Tiānxià*, "all that is under Heaven" (the *microcosm*, so to speak) try to shape their virtuous life according to the understanding of this system - "earth follows heaven, heaven follows the way [*Dào*]", *de fǎ tiān, tiān fǎ dào*.

Now, if Heaven, *Tiān*, has the authority to grant a mandate to the ruler, govern the movement of the universe, shelter the ancestors, command the seasons, grace the harvests, send natural catastrophes and define the passage of time - an authority that we can call *Tiāndào*, the "Way of Heaven" or the Celestial Law - then the History of men takes place through these designs (Ivanhoe, 2007, p. 212). As we said before, the historian is the narrative interpreter of this temporal movement, which is therefore understood as a dialectic between human actions and cosmic regiments.

For this reason, we can even turn to the term that, until now, we have translated directly as "historian": *Shǐ* 史. This translation, although recurrent, is excessively reductionist for the sake of its intelligibility. When used as a professional qualifier, *shǐ* can mean historian, scribe, copyist or astrologer. In fact, this polysemy is more about translation into a Western language than its actual Chinese application, since by being called a *shǐ*, a character like Sīmǎ Qiān was not a historian, a scribe or an astrologer: he was all three at the same time, because in the traditional Chinese historiographical matrix, this separation would not make sense. It is up to the *shǐ*, after all, to record the fact, organize the records, note the changes and draw the dialectical lesson between past and present from the recognition of *Tiāndào*. In other words, its function is not only that of the isolated record or the abstract narrative, but the interpretation - as said before - of the cosmic-terrestrial space-time generated by the interaction between *Tiān* and *Tiānxià*, between Heaven and "Below Heaven", between the cosmic dimension and the socio-political dimension.

In this logic lies the union between the *shǐ* as "historian" and the *shǐ* as "astrologer". Adapting this fusion to our Western language, we could say that the "historian" dimension is responsible for recording and interpreting human actions (political, social, economic, ideological), while the "astrologer" dimension seeks to understand the celestial conditions at the time of these actions, to mark the passage of time through the inexorability of the sky and so on. Curiously, this dialectical stance, this "hermeneutic circle" (Huang, 2007, p. 183), makes the *shǐ* at the same time an antiquarian, a politician and a prophet.

The mixture of past, present and future that comes from this interpretative perspective makes the historian-astrologer an important figure in the Chinese political context, precisely because, through historiographical analysis, he can reveal the righteousness or vice of the ruler - after all, it would be



precisely this combination of historian and astrologer that could look at the past and the present and, from this, state when an emperor receives or loses the *Tiānmìng*, the Heavenly Mandate.

An anecdote from a pre-imperial text summarizes this debate well. In the *Zuǒ Zhuán*, it is said that in 548 BC, an official of the State of Qí 齊, Cuī Shù 崔杼, killed his sovereign. A historian recorded this and Cuī Shù executed him for his insolence. A brother of the murdered historian continued the record and reaffirmed that Cuī Shù had killed his sovereign - and this second historian was also executed for it. The same situation is repeated with a third brother, and when the fourth brother doesn't back down and writes down the same thing, Cuī Shù gives up trying to control the historians (Tso-Ch'iu, 1989, p. 147). This passage shows us that if, on the one hand, a political official would not want his negative action to be recorded (and consequently judged in the present and the future), on the other hand, the historian could not neglect his task, even if it meant death. Neglecting to truly record and interpret things would mean ignoring the relentless movement of the cosmos, of nature and of *Dào*.

In short, the historian is also an astrologer because Heaven is also history. The cornerstone of this Chinese historiographical matrix is the inherent nature of *Dào* and *Tiān* - of *Tiāndào*, therefore. It is also worth remembering that the discussion about the cosmic order of existence is not only a pillar of historiography, but is also at the root of several predominant currents of thought in China. Confucian, Taoist, Legalist, Naturalist and Buddhist texts, as explained above, explore *Dào* and the immutable rules of the universe in their various ways, which means that intellectual or ideological matrices originating in these explorations have extreme longevity in the Chinese context. As Lǎozǐ, one of the fathers of the *Dào* interpretation, says: "To know immutability is intelligence", *zhī cháng yuē míng* 知常曰明 (Tzu, 2011, p. 32). That which is constant and unchanging (the cosmic order) is dear to this historiographical approach concerned with the maintenance of things.

If there is, therefore, a framework of necessary immutability for the traditional Chinese historical mentality - *Tiāndào*, cosmic dynamism, the movement of the stars, the implacable passage of time and natural phenomena - the analysis of human actions and their effect on the world must generate a necessary contrast so that knowledge can be synthesized. After all, this historiographical knowledge is produced in a dialectical activity between well-established binomials: Heaven and Earth, the *Dào* of nature and political actions, past and present, vice and virtue. "It is by negating the negative that the positive manifests itself" (Huang, 2007, p. 182). In other words, historical knowledge lies in the dialectical synthesis between the *immutable* and the *mutable*, that which remains in its eternal cycle and that which changes and is fleeting in the face of the inexorable.



This dialectic helps to maintain a long-term historiographical matrix. It can already be seen, for example, in the *Yi Jīng* 易經, the “Classic of Changes” (popularly referred to as *I Ching*), a text from the Zhōu period: “Heaven and Earth change, and the wise imitate these changes”, *Tiāndì biànhuà, shèngrén xiào zhī* 天地變化, 聖人效之 (*Yi King*, 1882, p. 14). Likewise, aphorisms present in the *Analects of Confucius* value the wisdom gained from the analysis of continuity and change as defined by *Yi Jīng*: “If a few more years were added to me and [from] fifty I used [those years] to study the *Mutations* (Yi), I could [stop making] great mistakes.” *jiā wǒ shù nián, wǔshí yǐ xué Yì, kěyǐ wú dàguò yǐ*, 加我數年、五十以學易、可以無大過矣 (*Confúcio*, 2012, p. 233).

Insofar as the classical texts of pre-imperial China will sediment this binomial logic of continuity and change, the historiography that develops from the Hàn period to the Qīng period, especially its internal differences and criticisms, will incorporate the dialectic of immutability and change. This explains why, as discussed earlier, more recent historiographical positions, such as Zhāng Xuéchéng’s, can criticize their predecessors while defending what they also defended: historiography must understand the essence of all change.

Therefore, between the immutability of *Dào* and the cosmic authority of *Tiāndào*, this doctrine of immutability/change can be defined as *Tōngbiàn* 通變. The term, understood as “law of change”, “analogy of mutability” or “all change”, is difficult to translate precisely and literally. To better explain the idea, *Yi Jīng* makes an analogy with the opening and closing of a door: “the opening that follows the closing can be understood as *biàn* 變 (change); the passage from one state to another infinitely can be called *tōng* 通 (constancy)”, *yī hé yī pì wèi zhī biàn; wǎnglái bu qióng wèi zhī tōng*, 一闔一闢謂之變; 往來不窮謂之通 (*Tian*, 2000, p. 442). This stance, inaugurated in China’s distant pre-imperial past, shows that the dialectical logic of change and continuity is resolved from the capacity for analogy contained in the relationship: “to explain an item or event is first to place it within a schema organized in terms of analogical relationships between the items selected for the schema, and then to reflect and act in terms of the suggestiveness of these relationships” (*Hall & Ames*, 1995, pp. 124-125). *Tōngbiàn*, then, could be better translated (conceptually) as “continuity in change”.

In simpler terms, then, it can be said that *Tōngbiàn*, an important aspect of various Chinese currents of thought, proposes that human events (punctual and therefore changeable) are deeply understood when seen in a system of correlation. This correlation happens precisely because there are two basic polarities: the immutable (*Tōng*) and the mutable (*Biàn*). Understanding the correlation between one and the other means understanding the transformative process. Returning to the analogy of the door: change can be seen when the door opens and when the door closes.





They are different states, and therefore a transformation is taking place. A superficial analysis would only say “the door closed” or “the door opened”. However, a closer look will show that this movement of opening and closing is constant, since the door is fixed in an immovable frame. It can change its basic state infinite times, but the transformative movement will always be the same because the fixed point - the door frame - doesn’t change. Therefore, a more careful analysis would say “the door can only open and close in these directions because a fixed, immutable structure holds it in place. The mutability of the door depends on the immutability of its frame”. In this analogy, the door is *Wànwù* 萬物, “all things” (animals, objects, people, governments), while its frame is *Tiān*. Through the doctrine of *Tōngbiàn*, we can see the direct correlation between one and the other and, ultimately, this link would allow the sage (or, in this case, the historian) to recognize *Tiāndào*.

### **“To penetrate the essence of all change”: concluding notes on the cosmic order of Chinese historiography.**

Having made this very brief foray into the history of Chinese imperial historiography, what can we conclude? First, some initial postulates: the formation of pre-imperial currents of thought, combined with the valorisation of the past, ancestry and moral example, create a logical structure for the perception of history itself. Looking at the past acquires a formative and interpretative function even before the “formalization” of historiographical practices with *Sīmǎ Qiān* – that is, the seed of this approach was already in texts considered classics, such as the *Shūjīng*, the *Chūnqiū* and the *Yì Jīng*. In other words, it is possible to perceive a certain level of transtemporal dialog (and feedback) between different Chinese texts - the appreciation of the past therefore means an appreciation for the perspective of tradition and continuity.

For this reason, authors as far apart chronologically as *Sīmǎ Qiān* (2nd century BC), *Liú Zhijī* (8th century AD) and *Zhāng Xuéchéng* (18th century AD) seem to propose similar reflections regarding the function of historiography and the problems of the techniques or approaches applied in their respective contexts. The criticisms made by *Zhijī* and *Xuéchéng*, for example, are very much focused on institutional interference in the historian’s work, which also points to the public (and political) importance of the analytical toil of the past. It is clear from these thinkers that History should be protected from political ambition because it would be in a much nobler field than that of worldly affairs: the field of interpreting the cosmic order, celestial designs and immutable things.



If we understand that, in its longevity, Chinese imperial historiography operates on similar bases and brings the same recurring criticisms throughout various temporalities, it becomes clear that this superior imperative that we have alluded to - the cosmic order - is central to its structuring. This celestial essence can be understood as *Tiān*, the sky that establishes *Tiāndào*, the Celestial Path. It is therefore undeniable that the concept of *Tiān* is essential to the cohesion of imperial Chinese historiography.

And what exactly is this cohesion? We can understand it as follows: the traditional historiography of Imperial China is written with a well-defined backdrop - a kind of stage where the action takes place or a frame that contains and limits the painting of a picture. This backdrop (or frame) is the sky, both in its natural and astronomical dimension and in its more ethereal and intangible dimension. From the movements of the stars and the natural portents, the *Tiāndào*, the Path established by the cosmic forces, is deduced - hence, for example, the Celestial Mandate originates. The doctrine of *Tiān* and *Dào* (or rather, the plural doctrines that develop throughout Chinese history) has deep roots, and it is precisely its cognitive weight that creates this containment-cohesion for historiographical work.

Faced with the framework created by *Tiān*, the practice of investigating the past takes on a more apparent meaning: to penetrate the essence of all change, that is, to understand the fleeting paths of all that is beneath the sky. We thus enter the dialectic of *Tōngbiàn*, the doctrine that investigates change through continuity - and also understands continuity through change. This perspective, discussed earlier, is at the epistemological heart of Chinese imperial historiography, but it should be pointed out that both change and continuity, *Biàn* and *Tōng*, can only be understood and properly analyzed when placed at the fixed point offered by a cohesive structure. For this reason, *Tiān* is essential.

Obviously, the scenario outlined here is excessively general. It certainly ignores the vast specificities of the histories written (and the historians who have written them) over two millennia or more. There are details, polemics and arguments that can and should be explored in greater depth. But, as the doctrine of continuity in change teaches us, the specific depends on the general to be what it is. Similarly, each particular work produced within Chinese historiography in its imperial time depends on an epistemological framework that has been established, understood and accepted. A general framework, as I said. Investigating the cohesive and ordering role of celestial inexorability, therefore, is fundamental to understanding Chinese historiographical work as a whole.

We can therefore conclude that this is *Tiān's* role: to create the Chinese historiographical epistemology, the general framework through which the change of time is understood, and which



connects past, present and future. That is why, as we have seen, the historian is also an astrologer: because it is up to him to interpret humans and the stars, fleeting actions and permanence and, in his understanding, to unveil what is the Celestial Way.

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